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Narratives of change: How social innovation initiatives construct societal transformation

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ABSTRACT

Alongside current policy discourses on the transformative potentials of social innovation, social innovation initiatives also construct their own accounts of how society can be transformed and by whom. Building on state-of-the-art futures studies and narrative research and their linkages, this article unfolds these narratives of change (NoC) by social innovation initiatives. A tripartite framework is used to analyse and discuss the content, construction and role of the NoC of four initiatives: Ashoka, the Global Ecovillage Network, RIPESS and Shareable. The analysis shows that all NoC suggest alternative economic arrangements that challenge the current neoliberal, capitalist system, including the dominant policy narrative of (social) innovation for economic growth. It further highlights the pivotal role of NoC in the construction of individual and social identities and the efforts dedicated to the development and communication of collectively shared worldviews. Differences in NoC are identified regarding the more deliberative or rather hierarchical ways of narrative construction. Concluding reflections highlight how NoC reveal the failings of current systems and suggest alternatives, that their construction mirrors and thereby tests the model of change advocated by social innovation initiatives and that NoC may lure actors into enrolment by offering opportunities to engage in meaning-making.

1. Introduction[1]

Many contemporary discourses understand social change as driven by processes of innovation. For example, the European Union has adopted an *Innovation Union* strategy to realise smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe 2020, aiming "*to create an innovation-friendly environment that makes it easier for great ideas to be turned into products and services*" (EC, 2018). Far from focusing on technological innovation only, the EU uses the concept of social innovation to appreciate the social dimensions of innovation and to address pressing societal challenges, such as climate change, poverty, lacking equity and social justice (BEPA, 2010; Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017). Social innovation is thus considered a tool to shape society (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017;

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[1] An early working version of this article has been published online (Wittmayer, Backhaus et al., 2015). The analysis presented here follows from further elaborations of the theoretical framing and embedding, allowing for a sharpened analysis and discussion.

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Fougère, Segercrantz, & Seeck, 2017; Grimm, Fox, Baines, & Albertson, 2013; Schubert, 2018). The Bureau of European Policy Advisors (BEPA), for example, argued that: "*at a time of major budgetary constraints, social innovation is an effective way of responding to social challenges, by mobilising people's creativity to develop solutions and make better use of scarce resources*" (BEPA, 2010, p. 7).

Over the past years, many actors have embraced the notion of social innovation for its broadening of the previously more technology-oriented innovation paradigm (SI-DRIVE Policy Declaration, 2017; The Lisbon Declaration, 2018; Vienna Declaration, 2011). At the same time, some consider this broader understanding of innovation still too intimately connected with what Strand, Saltelli, Giampietro, Rommetveit, and Funtowicz (2018, p. 1850) described as "*the master narrative of innovation for growth and its related socio-technical imaginaries*". Critical voices point to the ambiguous relation between social innovation and neo-liberalism (Moulaert, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2005). In these analyses, social innovation is put in the service of the neoliberal growth paradigm since mainstream discourse interprets it in terms of market mechanisms and actors and depoliticises problem framings – often to justify neoliberal public policies (Fougère et al., 2017; Jessop et al., 2013; Schubert, 2018). In this understanding, social innovation is just another means for fuelling smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the overall EU policy goal for 2020.

At the same time, social innovation is also invoked by political and social movements in a politico-ideological fashion oriented towards human development (Moulaert, 2013). In this context social innovation is accredited with the role to develop "alternative socio-political discourses" (Moulaert, 2013, p. 18). Groups of people involved in social innovation initiatives, self-proclaimed or considered as such by others, generally have their own ideas about how our societies can be transformed and what their role in this process is. They can be considered to follow a strategy for social change that focuses on *prefiguration* (Monticelli, 2018). This is to say that the practices they engage in are foreshadowing, or prefiguring already within existing societal structures, the sought-after society (Leach, 2013). Ecovillages, for example, grow their own food, produce their own energy and often have shared ownership of land and houses to express their ideals of social and ecological sustainability. However, social innovation initiatives do not only propose new ways of doing and organising, but typically also engage in the construction of reality through new ways of framing and knowing (cf. Avelino et al., 2017; Haxeltine, Pel, Dumitru et al., 2017). They might not consider themselves as 'futurists' at all but still challenge, alter or replace dominant framings of the future and can therefore be considered "futures movements" (Slaughter, 1993).

Seeking to gain political and scientific acknowledgement for alternative practices typically requires construction of and engagement with expertise and credibility (Pel & Backhaus, 2018). In line with insights from interpretive policy analysis (Fischer & Forester, 1993) and discursive institutionalism, social innovation initiatives also attempt to bring about change by speaking of it (Schmidt, 2011). The impact and reach of the narratives of social innovation initiatives is not to be underestimated, as modern information and communication technologies enable collaborative construction and broad sharing across networked individuals and initiatives at a global scale. Their stories, ideas and metaphors frame current problems, promise alternative futures and propose ways to get there. By focusing on the content, construction and performativity of what we refer to as narratives of change, this study unravels how the abstract notion of social innovation, which has become firmly established in scientific and political discourse, is made meaningful by and for social innovation initiatives themselves. In this vein, it also aims to pluralize the debate and provide alternative views on social change (cf. Bina, Mateusc, Pereira, & Caffa, 2017).

Due to the power of stories to evoke imagination, provide a guide for action and structure uncertainty (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015), the field of futures studies has seen a surging interest regarding the potential of narrative approaches for futures thinking (Burnam-Fink, 2015; Frittaion, Duinker, & Grant, 2010; Inayatullah, 2008; Miller, O'Leary, Graffy, Stechel, & Dirks, 2015; Raven & Elahi, 2015). For Jarva (2014a, 2014b), narratives hold the potential to bridge the gap between images about futures that result from (participatory) work of futurists and concrete action. Correspondingly, narrative research has started shifting its focus from the past and present to future narratives (Sools, 2012; Sools, Tromp, & Mooren, 2015; Squire, 2012). Building on insights from both scholarly traditions and their linkages, this article substantiates our understanding of 'narratives of change' to refer to sets of ideas, concepts, metaphors, discourses or story-lines about societal transformation (Avelino et al., 2017; Wittmayer, Backhaus et al., 2015). In doing so, we acknowledge that the term has been used by other scholars (e.g. Berendse, Duijnhoven, & Veenswijk, 2006; Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004; Doolin, 2003), but has remained under conceptualised (for an exception in the context of discourses of change in organisations, see Veenswijk & Chisalita, 2011). Our understanding of narratives of change includes the development of a three-fold approach to studying ideas about social change as constructed and shared by social innovation initiatives. Firstly, we develop an analytical framework to study narratives of change that distinguishes a rationale (problem description and envisioned future), relevant actors, and the ordering of activities and developments in a meaningful plot. Treating these narratives as data allows for the systematic comparison of different narratives of change and thus of the alternative futures and models of change that initiatives are proposing. Secondly, since social innovation initiatives are not singular actors and are, consequently, not sharing a singular narrative, we take a constructivist perspective to explore how narratives are negotiated and reproduced by members on an ongoing basis. Thirdly, since they are considered a key strategy of activism (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015), we take a performative perspective to explore the role of narratives of change in social change processes. The research question guiding this study is: *How do social innovation initiatives seek to advance societal transformation through their narratives of change?*

This article challenges the earlier-introduced, pervasive reductionist understanding of social change as innovation for economic growth by showing the empirical diversity of contemporary narratives of change, their construction and their role in social change processes. The article concentrates on four social innovation initiatives: (1) Ashoka - a global network of social entrepreneurs; (2) Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) - a network of ecological intentional communities, (3) Réseau Intercontinental de Promotion de l'Économie Sociale et Solidaire (RIPESS) - a network of networks and political movement for the promotion of social and solidarity economy across the globe and (4) Shareable – a network for the sharing economy (see Table 2).

The following section first discusses the existing and missing linkages between futures studies and narrative research and arrives at the formulation of an analytical framework bearing questions for empirical research (Section 2). Next to outlining data collection

and analysis, the methodology section outlines the selection criteria for the cases in more depth (Section 3). Section 4 provides the empirical findings for the different dimensions of the analytical framework and comparatively discusses them across the four cases, followed by a conclusion (Section 5).

2. Towards an analytical framework for narratives of change

This section introduces and explicates the three elements of our analytical framework, narrative content (2.1), narrative construction (2.2) and the role of narratives (2.3), in view of existing literature. We summarize and operationalize the framework (2.4) which prepares the ground for a discussion of our methodological approach to studying narratives of change in Section 3.

2.1. Narrative content: structuring pasts, presents and futures

Narrative is one of the key modes of knowing for human beings, who have been recognized as *homo narrans* (Fisher, 1985) and who, in and through stories, learn about, make sense of and act in and on the world. It is through narrative structures, that human beings think, perceive, imagine and make moral choices (Sarbin, 1986).

Narratives are a linguistic instrument that logically structures events and actions in relation to internal and external occurrences in time (Dowling, 2011; Hyvärinen, 2008). More often than not, the focus in narrative research has been on the (biographical) past or the (experiential) present (Hammack, 2008; Hyvärinen, 2010; Salmon & Kohler Riessman, 2013). Only recently, the topic of alternative and desirable futures has received more attention in narrative research (Sools, 2012; Sools et al., 2015; Squire, 2012). Amongst other, this opens up the possibility for the plot to show which strategies and events are believed to lead up to a desired future. In futures studies, Inayatullah (2008) distinguishes between five archetypical future images, including 'evolution and progress' focusing on the potential of technologies; 'collapse' indicating a dystopia; 'gaia' introducing an all-inclusive world garden; 'globalism' making the world smaller and smaller, and 'back to the future' calling for a return to simpler ways of life. He also introduces 'model of social change' as a key concept that focuses on how the future can be influenced and by whom (Inayatullah, 2008). This aligns with key ingredients of narratives such as the active protagonist and a morale or evaluative standpoint which imbues meaning and ideology (Hammack, 2008; Nünning et al., 2010). Only those events and activities are described that are meaningful to the narrators in that they either bring about or hinder a specific future.

Building on the still nascent yet shared interest in the role of narratives in processes of transformative change, which is emerging at the intersection of futures studies and narrative enquiry, this study proposes 'narratives of change' as an integrative concept. Well-established notions of narrative research are directed towards the future and combined with futures concepts of *alternative futures* and *models of change*. Narratives of change include a *rationale* (problem description and desired future), relevant *actors* (those working towards, those opposing or counteracting and those ignorant of the desired future) and a *plot* (the contextualised activities and developments leading to the desired future). In other words, using narrative structure as a basis allows to empirically compare the **content** of narratives of change pointing to relevant reasons, actors and approaches for change.

2.2. Narrative construction: distributed creation of narratives

As Barthes (1975) infamously elaborates in his *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, narratives are ubiquitous. The creation, preservation and spreading of narratives can take countless forms. They emerge from interaction, may be 'small' (mundane) or 'big' (e.g. autobiographical) (Georgakopoulou, 2007), and travel through time and space. First and foremost, narratives are meaning-making devices, constructing and negotiating reality (Bruner, 1991), i.e. a particular view on life, the world or an event. While large commercial organisations carefully construct their corporate identity, including a brand's history 'top down', narratives and their construction can also connect dispersed individuals or initiatives to particular topics or transformative ambitions 'bottom-up', in regional, national or transnational networks. For example, the Global Ecovillage Network is made up of about 10.000 intentional communities and related initiatives sharing ideas about sustainability (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). We can thus distinguish relatively hierarchically developed narratives (since corporate brand development still involves deliberation in accordance with corporate governance structures) from relatively deliberatively developed narratives (since deliberation can be prone to being captured by particularly outspoken or charismatic individuals).

For social innovation initiatives, the collective negotiation of the past, construction of the present and design of the future can be considered one of their core activities (Davies, 2002). Studying the social construction of narratives implies studying their development, their reception and their mediation through slogans, stories, symbols and material elements and recognising their construction as engagement in internal and external discursive politics. Firstly, a variety of activities that members of social innovation initiatives engage in contribute to the distributed construction of narratives of change. Secondly, such construction can be done in a more or less hierarchical or deliberative way and thus provide more or less voice to different individuals and initiatives. Thirdly, a plethora of narratives exists at different times and different levels of analysis (i.e. societal discourses, personal stories, organisational myths), which interact and mutually influence one another (Rappaport, 1995). This can give rise to seemingly similar or even the same concepts, notions and narratives circulating in different actor groups that are, however, subjectively differently conceived and based in phenomenologically radically different experiences (Taylor Aiken, 2019). Finally, the form and content of narratives are also shaped by the materials that carry them, such as information and communication technologies (incl. the Internet, social media, print, video) (Elliott & Squire, 2017). Considering their distributed construction, different and diverse narratives will always coexist within initiatives and networks, yet some degree of convergence is possible and likely in seeking to challenge common rivals or collectively

support strategic allies. Studying narratives of change thus requires a focus on diverse and diverging elements as well as the widely shared 'master narrative' (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015) that can be considered a common denominator across different social units, from individuals to local initiatives and transnational networks.

Building on these discussions, we empirically analyse the **construction** of narratives of change by unpacking the following dimensions: the actual construction activities that actors engage in, including the degree of deliberation or hierarchy involved, the interrelation with broader societal narratives as well as information and communication infrastructures that actors rely on.

2.3. The role of narratives: the potential of alternative framings and knowings

Following Garud and Gehman (2012), we acknowledge the performativity of narratives as they re-interpret the past and guide current actions in anticipation of a different future. By devising narratives of change, social movement actors (to which we count social innovation initiatives) are thus deeply and explicitly involved in the production and maintenance of meaning, or the *politics of signification* (Hall, 1982). Linking futures studies and narrative research, we highlight three roles that are accorded to narratives in processes of social change: changing frames, forming identity and guiding action.

Firstly, the search for and the construction of alternative narratives includes questioning and **reframing** the status quo and challenges and confronts dominant norms, values and beliefs. It is therefore inherently a transformative activity (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). Jarva (2014a, p. 17) considers narratives as "*comments, often on the deviations from the social convention*". Narratives of change that propose alternative futures often have an antagonistic relationship with dominant societal narratives, such as those that push for growth and the primacy of the market. Hence, narratives of change can be viewed as counter-narratives which are used by social movements to "*struggle against pre-existing cultural and institutional narratives and the structures of meaning and power they convey*" (Davies, 2002, p. 25). An example is the 'rhizomatic' growth narrative developed by Transition Town initiatives, challenging prevailing innovation imaginaries of one-directional growth, rationalization and central control with a counter-narrative premised on self-organization and loose network structures (Scott-Cato & Hillier, 2010). In these and other cases, narratives are used strategically to change the discursive environment and challenge the interpretive authority of others (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). The contest among and between established narratives and not-(yet)-established narratives, reveals how every story is vulnerable "*to the emergence of the untold*" (Hopkinson, 2015, p. 191).

Secondly, personal but also group **identity formation** crucially relies on developing coherent storylines. Personal identity can be expressed and built through narratives (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013). The interweaving of personal life stories and broader narratives that resonate with values and expectations that people already hold can contribute to identity formation and empowerment (Davies, 2002; Rappaport, 1995; Riessman, 2008). Thus, narrative work is also identity-related work (Somers & Gibson, 1994) and struggles with building a coherent narrative imply struggles with defining personal or collective identity. Similar to oftentimes less explicit sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009), narratives of change create a shared sense of belonging and a community identity that structure actions and meaning based on a common outlook on social reality and a desired future (Pfotenhauer & Jasanoff, 2017). Thereby, narratives enrol stakeholders for their cause and in related initiatives (Garud, Gehman, & Giuliani, 2014).

Finally, recognising the power of stories, futures studies have long since employed narratives for scenario development (Frittaion et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2015) to evoke imagination and, ideally, provide a **guide for action** (Jarva, 2014b). Amongst other, the backcasting approach has become a well-established tool to discover alternatives and guide decisions for goal-directed change (Dreborg, 1996). As one notable linking pin between futures studies and narrative enquiry, scenarios may be improved through an increased focus on literary elements (e.g. Burnam-Fink, 2015; Raven & Elahi, 2015). Like future visions, scenarios and backcasting, narratives of change invite us to think 'from what is to what if' (Sools, 2012). Narrative and practice mutually inform and shape each other (Faizullaev & Cornut, 2017). On the one hand, discourse is a product of tacit, experience-based knowledge and assumptions (Bueger & Gadinger, 2015) and narratives emerge from and are sustained by practices. On the other hand, the performativity of narratives leads to ideas being put into practice; for example, in a prefigurative way that enacts the future in the present (Leach, 2013; Swain, 2017). The alignment of day-to-day activities with narrative content increases the legitimacy of ideas and advances desired futures and models of social change. Informing others about ideas and experiences through stories has also always been a powerful avenue to persuasion and, possibly even, engagement in practice – or 'practitioner recruitment' (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012).

In sum, we analyse the **role** of narratives of change in social change processes in two ways. Firstly, we identify roles that social innovation initiatives themselves ascribe to their narratives and narrative practices and secondly, we highlight the role of initiatives' narratives of change in general processes of social change and societal transformation.

2.4. An analytical framework for narratives of change

Built at the intersection of futures studies and narrative research, our analytical framework identifies the content, the construction and the role of narratives as key foci for empirical investigation (see Table 1).

3. Methodology

Data collection and analysis took place in the context of the EU-funded "TRANsformative Social Innovation Theory" (TRANSIT) project which aimed to understand how and to what extent social innovation contributes to transformative change by studying 20 transnational networks of social innovation as embedded case studies (Wittmayer et al., 2017; Avelino et al., 2017; Haxeltine, Pel,

Table 1
Framework for analysing content, construction and roles of narratives of change.

Content of narrative	Why does the world have to change? (Rationale)	- What are the current problems? - What is the desired future?
	Who are the relevant actors? (Actors)	- Who are the actors working towards the desired future? - Who are the actors opposing or counteracting the desired future?
	How is the desired future achieved? (Plot)	- What developments and activities lead to the desired future? - When and where do these take place?
Construction of narrative	How are narratives of change constructed?	- What activities do actors engage in to construct a shared narrative of change? - How do narratives of change relate to dominant societal narratives? - In what ways is narrative construction mediated by information and communication technologies and infrastructures?
Role of narrative	What role do narratives of change play in social change processes?	- What roles do social innovation initiatives ascribe to their narratives/ narrative practices? - What roles do narratives of change of social innovation initiatives play in processes of societal transformation?

Dumitru et al., 2017). Each social innovation network was studied as embedded case at the level of the transnational network and at the level of two local initiatives. Following methodological guidelines that included sensitizing concepts (Wittmayer, Avelino, Dorland, Pel & Jørgensen, 2015; Jørgensen et al., 2014), data collection was primarily done in the period from 2014-2016.

For our study of narratives of change, we selected four cases, Ashoka, GEN, RIPESS and Shareable (see Table 2). This choice implied covering a spectrum of narratives that either highlight the role of individuals in societal change processes or that stress the importance of communities or collectives. While Ashoka emphasises the changemaker potential in every individual and provides a network for these changemakers, Shareable supports exchange between networked individuals and communities, GEN connects a great number of eco-communities and RIPESS seeks to unite the efforts of many groups engaged in social and solidarity economy initiatives. Using a diverse set of cases for our empirical exploration, we aimed to cover a variety that strengthens the robustness of findings (Eisenhardt, 1989) and helps to build a comparative understanding of narratives of change across different contexts.

For each of these four cases, we conducted interviews, analysed secondary online and offline documents and, where appropriate in terms of time, effort and opportunity, engaged in participant observation (see Table 3). The use of these different research methods allows triangulating data and provides for more robust results (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012). This article is based on a *retrospective analysis* of the primary data, the empirical case-study reports (Kunze & Avelino, 2015; Pel, Lema-Blanco & Dumitru, 2017; De Majo, Elle, Hagelskjær Lauridsen, & Zuijderwijk, 2015; Matolay, Weaver, Strasser, Vasseur, & Pataki, 2015) and a database describing important moments in the history of local initiatives (Pel, Bauler et al., 2017), using the analytical framework introduced in Section 2.3. Doing so, allowed us to analyse ideas, concepts, metaphors, discourses and story-lines about societal transformation articulated in various forms (oral, written, or in (moving) images), by a variety of speakers and authors, at various instances within diverse local initiatives in different countries.

We focus on the 'master narrative' recurring across a variety of contexts for the content analysis (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). We (re-)constructed more or less coherent, collectively more or less agreed, temporarily more or less stabilized – but in all cases actively circulated – narratives of change, while acknowledging that these are snapshots of more fluid realities (Pel, Dorland, Wittmayer & Jorgensen, 2017; Haxeltine, Pel, Wittmayer et al., 2017). These master narratives often coincide with the network-level narrative (see Table 4). We focus on shared aspects rather than on the deviations or differences between different versions, since we are interested in showcasing and comparing alternative narratives about societal transformation that are agreeable for many people. In doing so, we ourselves are becoming co-narrators and co-producers of a specific version of the narrative. This study acknowledges

Table 2
Introduction to the four social innovation initiatives under study.

Social innovation initiative	Description
Ashoka	Since 1980, Ashoka is identifying and selecting high-profile social entrepreneurs to become Ashoka fellows. It provides them with access to funding and the Ashoka network to develop their system-changing ideas. In 2018, there were some 3500 Ashoka fellows in 92 countries.
Global Ecovillage Network (GEN)	Founded in 1995, GEN is a global grassroots network (with continental and national dependencies) of more than 10.000 ecovillages and other intentional communities. GEN promotes social, economic and spiritual aspects of sustainable living and encourages local community empowerment for regenerating social and natural environments.
Réseau Intercontinental de Promotion de l'Économie Sociale Solidaire (RIPESS)	Founded in 1997, RIPESS promotes the 'social solidarity economy'. RIPESS consists of 5 continental networks, which in turn have various national-level, regional-level and sector-level networks as members. Every four years, RIPESS organizes global forums to exchange, learn, collaborate and share information.
Shareable	Shareable was established in 2009 as a non-profit network that seeks to bring about the 'sharing transformation' by circulating regular newsletters, issuing guidebooks and sparking and supporting sharing networks. One of its main programs, the Sharing Cities Network, included over 50 cities in 2015.

Table 3
Overview of empirical basis.

Network	Local Cases	Interviews	Participant observation
ASHOKA	Ashoka Germany Ashoka Hungary	19	23h
Global Ecovillage Network	Schloss Tempelhof, Germany Tamera, Portugal	28	272h
RIPESS	Vosec, Belgium Cries, Romania	14	none
Shareable	Sharing City Nijmegen, Netherlands Sharing Gijon, Spain	18	62h

the fluidity and distributed nature of these narratives not only with respect to content but also by analysing their construction as well as their performativity. However, the (re-)construction of master narratives precludes paying due attention to discursive politics within or between social innovation initiatives or between narratives of change and dominant societal narratives.

4. Analysis: comparing narratives of change

Based on the proposed tripartite analytical framework for the study of narratives of change, the following section compares the narratives of change of the four social innovation initiatives in terms of narrative content (4.1), narrative construction (4.2) and the role of narratives (4.3).

4.1. Narrative content: alternative economic arrangements

The narratives of change of Ashoka, GEN, RIPESS and Shareable show a broad diversity of problem framings, future visions, actors involved as well as possible strategies (see Table 4).

Three significant commonalities underlie these four narratives of change, they all 1) question the current economic system; 2) show an appreciation of communal and relational values; and 3) are based on a holistic view of the human being.

The four narratives of change propose and practice **alternative economic arrangements** that question the current neoliberal market economy and its way of redistributing goods to different degrees. Ashoka focuses on combining positive societal impact with financial gains, challenging the widespread mismatch between business value and social value in the current economy. While social entrepreneurship questions the primacy of the for-profit market logic, it does, however, reinforce it at the same time. Shareable aims to re-personalize economic relations by showing people how to connect directly through peer-to-peer networks, which allows making use of the abundance of skills and good(s) present in society, thereby questioning the current way of organising market transactions through single and powerful public or market parties acting as transaction hubs in the current economic system. RIPESS proposes a social and solidarity economy as a political movement that countervails structural imbalances of the current economy and GEN's narrative of change includes freeing land from speculation through collective ownership and decision-making as well as more small-scale alternative markets such as the gift economy. Such narratives of social innovation initiatives thus carry different economic imaginaries and challenge the dominant neoliberal logic (Longhurst et al., 2016). However, the durability and resilience of the established economic regime is recognised as the key challenge for dispersed and fragmented initiatives trying to make alternative arrangements better known and more widely practiced.

All four initiatives question current social relations between different groups as being among others too competitive, marketized, or fragmented and aim at their renewal. The four narratives express a high appreciation of **communal and relational values**, including trust, collaboration and (mutual) empowerment. Shareable introduces sharing as the main mode of exchange based on a trusting relation and sees it as a precursor of commoning. While Shareable mainly uses online infrastructures and virtual connections, GEN focuses on human-scale settlements and aims to build sustainable, supportive, equal and free community cultures. RIPESS seeks to build community on a much larger, international scale in the form of a global political movement that perpetuates equality, sustainability and solidarity. Ashoka fosters (more exclusive) community relations among selected social entrepreneurs, while also nurturing relational values among actors who can support social entrepreneurs. With the exception of Ashoka, the initiatives aim for more justice and democracy through either political struggle of united 'underdogs' (RIPESS) or by inspiring or building communities based on egalitarian values, (Shareable, GEN). These narratives are thus countering current trends such as increasing individualisation and alienation that are perceived as expressions of a deeper cultural crisis of Western societies (cf. Loorbach et al., 2016; Szejnwald Brown & Vergragt, 2016).

Another commonality concerns the **framing of human beings** as characters with more complex needs, hopes, dreams and desires than those of the 'homo economicus'. Instead of 'rational actors' striving for personal utility and profit maximization, the four narratives recognize and appreciate human beings as creative, driven, ethical and inspirational (Ashoka), spiritual, empathetic and community-oriented (GEN), reciprocal and solidary (RIPESS) or generous and able to communally self-provide (Shareable). In all cases, individual and collective agency is highlighted as an essential feature of human existence and active engagement is invited and encouraged. The most central commonality of the four narratives in this respect is the act of embedding more holistic actors in a coherent storyline, whether this be a tale of struggle and persistence (Ashoka, RIPESS), of reflection, personal growth through

Table 4
Overview of narratives of change of four social innovation initiatives.

Rationale: why does the world have to change?	
Ashoka	Change is accelerating exponentially as we move beyond industrial society. Survival depends on the capacity to adapt and innovate. In the desired future, 'everyone' will be a creative and powerful changemaker, addressing the problems s/he considers relevant to create a world, which will be "*fundamentally different and a far safer, happier, more equal, and more successful place*" (Drayton, 2006, p. 13). Ashoka formulates eight topic areas to be addressed by social entrepreneurs, including the environment, human rights, civic participation, and education.
GEN	Current developments, such as climate change, demographic change, technological change and inequalities, are grounded in a fundamental alienation and disconnectedness from nature, others and ourselves. The desired future includes the reconciliation of different cultures, an integration of individual needs and community, reclaiming of real estate and land and, to some degree, self-sufficiency and ecological responsibility.
RIPESS	Economic globalization and the associated structural imbalances such as exploitation, gender inequality, social exclusion, North-South inequality and poverty are highly problematic. Various dispersed local alternative economies constantly struggle against the dominant global model of a hegemonic neoliberal order. A global vision on the social solidarity economy is based on an economic model in which the bottom line is broadened to include values of equality, sustainability and solidarity.
Shareable	A 'value crisis' is immanent related to lack of trust in formerly dominant institutions such as the state. Moreover, the loss of traditional practices of commoning and sharing comes along with resource depletion. This leaves people prone to market and consumption-based identities which were shaken by the economic crises since 2008. In the desired future, the city is organized through the commons and all institutions are democratized. People start to self-organize in distributed, peer-to-peer networks without public authorities or big businesses interfering as centralized middleman.
Actors: Who are the relevant actors?	
Ashoka	Social entrepreneurs are: "*the most powerful citizen problem solvers"* (Interview Ashoka Country Representative Germany 2014; Matolay et al., 2015). Single individuals with a good idea, the right strategy and the appropriate competences and resources are able to generate systemic change. Shifting from the 'one-in-ten-million social entrepreneur' to an 'everyone a changemaker' vision, meant adopting a wider notion of protagonists to focus on youth, employees and citizens in general. Beyond this individual focus, the role of teams and collective impact through collaborations across organisations and sectors has also gained more importance.
GEN	Individuals within a community-setting are practicing new ways of living that are in line with the desired future. Social change has to start from within each individual: "*Changing the world one heart at a time*" (GEN Interview #2 in Kunze & Avelino, 2015, p. 24).
RIPESS	Social solidarity economic actors (incl. networks, social enterprises, cooperatives, ethical banks, micro-credit networks, alternative currency schemes, consumer-producer networks, etc.) work towards and promote different kinds of alternative economies as part of a broader political movement. Actors with whom to make alliances (e.g. universities, local non-profit associations), are distinguished from those for strategic relationships (e.g. governments, political parties) and those that are spaces to influence (e.g. world trade organizations, European Union).
Shareable	The most important actors come from the grassroots, i.e. local communities or individuals starting to self-organize. They do so in interaction with market and public actors who are, on the one hand, considered necessary for bringing about change and on the other hand, impeding it.
Plot: How is the desired future achieved?	
Ashoka	For system change to occur, individuals' assumptions about themselves, the world, and their capacities to effect social change need to be aligned with taking responsibility for societal problems. Equipped with the right resources, networks and support, these individuals can develop systems changing potential. Institutional changes in education, funding and legislation, as well as cultural beliefs, values and norms are required for generating an enabling environment. To this end, (cross-sectoral) collaboration with diverse actors (e.g. experts, firms, foundations, schools and universities) are needed.
GEN	Individuals live in networked communities and engage in sustainable ways of living. Activities aimed at learning and educating play a central role in striving for systemic change and take place within the ecovillage (e.g. own schools, kindergartens, personality trainings), in interaction with others. Places of change are real physical spaces and the natural environment as 'stage' for human activities.
RIPESS	The social solidarity economy (SSE) will be brought about by building practice on the ground, building and strengthening SSE networks, research and advocacy, policy work on different levels, access to markets and raising visibility through education and communication. A clear, well-articulated and recognizable political voice for the great variety of transformation-oriented local networks and organizations seeks to overcome fragmentation. Apart from this political-discursive strategy, SSE actors are engaged in various concrete projects on the local or regional level.
Shareable	Every individual transformation is part of a long-term systemic transformation. Being involved in sharing initiatives leads to individual empowerment and, ultimately, cultural and economic change. The 'digital commons' offer digital tools and enable the construction of commons 'on the ground'.

community, and healing (GEN) or of sharing and communing (Shareable) towards a desired, alternative future.

4.2. Narrative construction: different degrees of deliberation and hierarchy

Narratives of change of social innovation initiatives evolve on an ongoing basis and are the product of the interaction of different people, stories and mediating infrastructures. All (members of) **social innovation initiatives engage in various activities that add up to the distributed construction of their narratives of change.** Each of the social innovation initiatives under study engages in general dissemination and communication activities including websites, newsletters, brochures or the use of social media, but also the organisation of conferences, symposia or workshops through which narratives are shared and reproduced. Four more activities can be distinguished that are more innate to some initiatives than to others. Firstly, some narratives of change are partly constructed through the authoritative voice of scientific debate and publications – either about the initiatives as such or the concepts that they seek to advance, such as the social and solidarity economy (RIPESS; e.g. Hiez & Lavillunière, 2013; Kawano, 2013) or social entrepreneurship (Ashoka; e.g. Leadbeater, 1997; Mair & Martí, 2006). Secondly, (the crafting of) images that illustrate and reaffirm central messages enrich and contribute to the construction of narratives of change. Ashoka, for example, uses the image of a swarm of fishes swimming in one direction with one fish of a different colour swimming in the opposite direction to strengthen its message that the individual social entrepreneur can change the world. Thirdly, sharing concepts and best practices in the form of guides or

handbooks is also a frequently used distillation and dissemination activity. Shareable, for example, communicates best practices and solidifies its narrative through the publication of books, such as 'Policies for Sharing Cities' (2013) or 'Sharing cities - Activating the urban commons' (2017). Finally, initiatives engage in shared storytelling. GEN actively provides for such moments, whether in formalized general assembly meetings, small-group discussions, one-on-one conversations or through singing, meditation and dancing.

We can also distinguish more deliberative vs. more hierarchical approaches to constructing narratives of change. GEN typically makes use of community-led participatory methods and deliberation for shaping network narratives. In line with the network's notion that change needs to be lived and experienced, conferences, summits, festivals, tours and courses are offered with time dedicated to the practice of storytelling. The Findhorn ecovillage recently organized and hosted the "New Story Summit" and launched a resource hub around exchanging narratives (see http://newstoryhub.com). All of these activities tellingly express the importance GEN accords to a creative and creating community. On the other end of the spectrum, Ashoka's overall narrative is lead-authored by a single individual, Bill Drayton, the CEO and founder of Ashoka. He developed key elements, which were subsequently adopted by country offices worldwide. Changes to this narrative are still centrally developed and distributed. Inspiring stories on Ashoka Fellows that are regularly shared on the Ashoka website merely function as exemplars. In contrast, RIPESS lacks a centrally coordinated story. It does, however, try to work collaboratively towards a shared perspective on alternative economies (RIPESS, 2015) that is based on the narratives existent within different parts of the global network of networks. Thereby, RIPESS pays tribute to its principles of direct democracy and inclusivity. Shareable exemplifies and solidifies its central narrative in the form of manuals that describe and define what sharing is, what forms it can take and how it may best be supported. In addition, the network also showcases each community's sharing story on its online platform. In short, the openness of a network's narrative of change to members' inputs appears to relate to the model of change it proposes: fostering engaged community living (GEN), inspiring and supporting individuals (Ashoka), relating and uniting diverse and dispersed experiments (RIPESS) or guiding individuals, communities, authorities and business through the sharing transformation (Shareable).

Whether more deliberatively or hierarchically developed, the narrative construction activities initiatives engage in are mediated through **information and communication technologies (ICT) and infrastructures**. The extent of reliance on and use of ICT again appears to mirror the model of change favoured by a network. Of the four cases discussed here, Ashoka and Shareable are particularly skilled in the use of ICT, including state-of-the-art websites and active accounts on various social media platforms. Considering that ICT play a central role in the innovation they are after, e.g. digital peer-to-peer trading platforms, their proficient use hardly comes as a surprise. GEN also exploits the breadth of possibilities modern ICT offers, not least to help spreading its narrative and related imagery. However, GEN seems to value face-to-face communication and local community interaction over technology-enabled exchange. RIPESS, in turn, encourages physical gatherings through global conferences or working visits, which are archived and made visible by means of a basic website.

Yet, narratives of change are not only created and shaped by members' narrative and other activities or material artefacts but also by their interaction with **broader societal discourses**. We have detailed how narratives of change relate to the hegemonic discourses of the neoliberal market economy and individualisation in terms of content (Section 4.1) and are addressing their role as counter-narratives in the following (Section 4.3). In terms of their construction, narratives of change might be adapted by picking up on new strategic alignments or oppositions as broader societal discourses are changing. Social innovation initiatives choose which broader discourses they consider important for their own positioning and strategically decide to either try to latch on to widely debated and hence well-known issues – or not. GEN, for example, due to its understanding of contemporary social and environmental challenges as symptomatic of an underlying, fundamental crisis in human-nature and human-human interactions tends to stay clear of reference to current day politics. Instead, their narrative focuses on communities "built around common positive values" (McLaughlin & Davidson, 1985, p. 22) and evokes imagery of ecovillages as 'safe havens' after system collapse.

4.3. The role of narratives: fuelling alternative framings, identities and practices

The perceived need for and importance of narrative is apparent from the considerable effort and resources all networks and many local and regional initiatives invest in crafting, maintaining, adjusting and sharing their narratives. This section analyses the role that the initiatives themselves ascribe to their narrative as well as the roles that research has attributed to narratives of change in broader processes of social change and societal transformation.

On some occasions, social innovation initiatives' attempts to challenge, alter or replace dominant institutions (Avelino et al., 2017; Haxeltine, Pel, Dumitru et al., 2017) manifest themselves in struggles over interpretive supremacy. Engagement in this struggle is one role of narratives of change that is well recognised among social innovation initiatives – that of **changing frames**. Consequentially, value-laden terminology may be embraced or rejected, and contestation may erupt around central notions that initiatives would like to claim and fill with alternative meaning. On the one hand, dominant narratives of economic growth, globalisation and the neoliberal world order are countered with alternatives such as social solidarity economy (RIPESS), social entrepreneurship (Ashoka), gift economy (GEN) or sharing economy (Shareable) (Section 4.1; Longhurst et al., 2016). Strong imagery, such as Ashoka's fish or GEN's butterfly, as well as argumentative bridges from well-known and widely-supported ideas to alternative utopias (Pel & Backhaus, 2018) are used to counter the incumbent focus on rational and competitive social and economic relations (Section 4.2). On the other hand, social innovation initiatives seek to strategically occupy alternative labels and narratives. Shareable, for example, fights fiercely by means of guidebooks and countless examples of sharing initiatives to ensure that 'sharing economy' is understood as 'real sharing' and not as Airbnb or Uber-like business models. The American Dream forms another better-known notion and narrative that Shareable seeks to re-interpret and re-align with its agenda, away from individual material

possession towards more sustainable ways of producing, organising and living (De Majo et al., 2015).

The frame-changing capacity of narratives is thus an important characteristic that social innovation initiatives value and exploit. For example, following years of selecting and working with individual changemakers, Ashoka realised the importance of a narrative that invites and invigorates people to join the challenge of changing the world and its institutions by reminding people of their individual and collective agency. Picking up on well-known quotes and metaphors, Ashoka proclaims that "*Social entrepreneurs are not content just to give a fish or teach how to fish. They will not rest until they have revolutionized the fishing industry*." (Ashoka in Matolay et al., 2015). A representative of Ashoka Germany explains:

> "We've come to understand that what we did all along through electing Fellows and creating these networks and platforms, […] was help people shift how they saw the world […] We have become more conscious that that is our function, that probably the single most powerful thing we can do […] is change how people see their role in society where everyone has a potential role. […] We've become more explicit about this function. We think now about framework change as what Ashoka is about whereas we used to think of Ashoka as about finding, electing, and supporting changemakers and making them successful." (Interview Ashoka Country Representative Germany 2014).

This quote also illustrates the recognition of the **identity-forming and meaning-making** aspects of narratives. As a network of networks that supports various social and solidarity economy practices, also RIPESS seeks to capitalise on the capacity of narratives to imbue activities with shared meaning and identity. Defining social solidarity economy and its role in today's world is a key task of the network. The goal to align and unite fragmented initiatives into a larger movement plays a central concern in these efforts. Developing an overarching narrative does not come without risk, however. If the general narrative and associated framing resonates with people and their personal stories and framings, ties between existing members are strengthened and new members are enrolled. In case of dissonance, members may leave, narrative work might continue and in terms of time, efforts and resources, costly interpretive struggles may ensue. RIPESS faces the dual challenge of closely competing narratives, such as those of the commons movement or credit unions; and of promoting a solidarity-based economy narrative that is controversial due to its radical Marxist connotations in contexts such as Romania.

Similarly, GEN considers the crafting of a story about alternative community living to be at the core of GEN's mission and its practices. Contrary to RIPESS' focus on a narrative of collective global solidarity, however, GEN seeks to strike a balance between emphasising the importance of the individual *as well as* the collective. GEN's logo and central metaphor, the butterfly that develops after 'imaginal cells' triggered metamorphosis, can be interpreted on individual and collective level. While GEN seeks to change "the world one heart at a time", it also celebrates weekly meditation sessions at dawn that are meant to connect ecovillages across the globe in a "ring of power" and celebrates traditional rituals of indigenous cultures at global network conferences for their unifying effects (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). Social innovation initiatives are, hence, invested in developing and strengthening narrative elements, including symbolism and metaphors, that support individual and collective identity formation and thus unite various local initiatives across languages, cultures, contexts and practices by promoting a shared framing of issues and ways to address them.

A final role of narratives of change lies in their intricate relationship with practice – both **narrative and practice** mutually inform and shape each other. For example, narratives of sustainability are the strongest motivation for individuals to intrinsically stabilize respective living practices in ecovillages, while these in turn inform the crafting of the GEN narrative about alternative community living (Schäfer et al., 2018). Narratives can function as practical guidelines providing general principles and concrete examples for the kind of activities and practices that help creating, shaping and thus prefiguring a desired, alternative future in the current world. Shareable with its guidebooks and the stories of member initiatives featured on their online platform provides a strong example in case. In ecovillages, prefigurative practices include making use of sustainable building materials and renewable energy, but also of alternative governance mechanisms such as sociocracy, which aims for more transparent, inclusive and accountable decision taking. While practices are inspired by narratives, narratives are built from practice and are changed due to experiences in practice. For example, the ecovillage Sieben Linden was founded following inspirational narratives with the intention to establish a completely self-sufficient village. The local group eventually noticed, however, that community processes are much more important for their resilience while autarky was too ambitious, which led to a change in practices – and narratives.

5. Conclusion

Building on insights from futures studies and narrative research and their linkages, we developed an analytical framework to study narratives of change that distinguishes between three main dimensions: their content, construction and role (Table 1). Based on this framework, the narratives of change of four social innovation initiatives (Ashoka, GEN, RIPESS and Shareable) were studied. On the one hand, the analytical framework proposed pushes the boundaries of narrative research by focusing on futures (rather than the past or present), on collectives (rather than on individuals) and on societal change. On the other hand, the research presented complements futures studies by focusing on narratives about alternative futures of social innovation initiatives, thereby highlighting their preoccupation with prefiguration – in word and deed. In the following, the main insights are gathered to answer our research question on how the narratives of change of social innovation initiatives seek to advance societal transformation. Finally, we suggest some possible avenues for future research.

Concerning **narrative content**, social innovation initiatives provide ideas about alternative futures through their narratives of change by opening up the straitjacket of the belief in a future that only holds 'more of the same'. In a constant struggle over interpretive supremacy with dominant narratives but also with each other, narratives of change seek to reveal the failings of current institutional systems and suggest alternatives. All four narratives studied put forth alternative economic arrangements, communal

and relational values and a more holistic view of the human being. These narratives challenge the current neoliberal, capitalist system, including the dominant policy narrative of (social) innovation for economic growth. However, considering the durability and path dependency of the current economic order, developing and promoting a viable counter-narrative of an alternative economy would require collaboration between social innovation initiatives – across important differences. An attempt at joining forces has been made by a number of initiatives, including GEN, through establishing the Ecolise network to catalyse sustainability transformations (see www.ecolise.net).

In terms of **narrative construction**, social innovation networks seem to develop shared identities or even 'brands' similar to commercial companies. There are differing tendencies, however: while some networks follow a more deliberative approach, others work with more hierarchical governance structures – in general and in terms of narrative construction. Initiatives whose narratives emphasize the strengths and merits of the individual, such as Ashoka, tend to have more hierarchically developed narratives. Initiatives whose narratives focus more on community aspects, such as GEN, tend to develop their narratives in a more deliberative and distributed way. Accordingly, the way narratives are constructed reflects the changes that these initiatives want to see in the world. It is thus a prefigurative practice and a testbed for alternative ways of organizing communal life.

In this regard, narrative construction closely relates to the **role of narratives** as guiding action, marking the close intertwinement of narrative and practice. Additionally, the new frames that social innovation initiatives put forth in their narratives of change have the power to enrol actors and contribute to personal and collective identity formation. In this regard, questions remain on the limits of inclusivity. The RIPESS narrative, for example, is broad and seeks to embrace many alternative arrangements and initiatives related to the social solidarity economy. As such, it is an example of a narrative that invites linkages and collaborations between initiatives to become a powerful alternative to the current economic order. However, in terms of member enrolment, it competes with initiatives with a clearer framing and identity proposition (such as ethical banks). This example showcases the tensions arising in terms of achieving broad enrolment and active engagement as well as providing meaningful identity propositions.

From these findings important future avenues emerge for both research and social innovation initiatives. Beyond this study, which took an 'inside' perspective to shed light on how social innovation initiatives construct their narratives of change, there are important questions concerning the discursive politics involved in the interactions with "external" actors and their narratives of change (or conservation). This includes the strategic adaptation of narratives of change (e.g. with language that is *en vogue* in policy making, such as co-creation or lab, to secure funding) but also how these alternative narratives of change are taken up, appropriated, commoditized or translated by other actors in policy or academia. Clearly, research on the process of narrative construction that also addresses cross-fertilisation of and by 'external' influences bears the potential for interesting insights. A future challenge for social innovation practice is to identify how social innovation initiatives can potentially collaborate strategically to move society beyond the current dominant economic order. Their appeal to imagination and their potential to enlist people in prefigurative practices has become apparent as important roles of narratives of change.

Declarations of interest

None.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

J.M. Wittmayer: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft. **J. Backhaus:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft. **F. Avelino:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **B. Pel:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **T. Strasser:** Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **I. Kunze:** Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **L. Zuijderwijk:** Investigation.

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